



Officer Jerome Perkins

Oral History Transcription

March 4, 2003 [Side B]

Interviewed by:	David Healey
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Summary:	Officer Jerome Perkins shares his experiences being among the first African American police officers in South Bend in the 1950s through the 1970s. Additionally, he talks about the riots in South Bend, working for Studebaker, and how the civil rights movement unfolded in this city.

- 0:00:03 [Jerome Perkins] ...Stay in town for maybe a week. And we didn't know what they were doing. They were just... in South Bend.
- [David Healey] They wouldn't say anything, they'd just come—
- [JP] They'd leave at the chief's office when they came into town to let the chief know that they were gonna be active in South Bend. They didn't say active, how. Just active. They let the chief know when they were leaving.
- [DH] And that was when you were a police officer.
- [JP] Yeah.
- [DH] So that would be during the Civil Rights Movement, then.
- [JP] Mm-hmm.
- 0:00:35 [DH] So let me get this right. The FBI would just show up, say we're here. They'd be doing something for a week or so, and then they'd leave?
- [JP] That's true.
- [DH] Interesting.
- [JP] Then they finally had an officer—they have an officer now. Most cities of this size have a... there was a vast difference between the way the police officers and other agencies react with each other. They've come a long way, too.
- [DH] When you were a police officer in South Bend, how did you get along with your white brother officers?
- [JP] Okay, because there was very little that we did together. No need to worry about... and it was there, you know. Not all of the white officers, but some of them had opinions that never changed. They stayed the same. And you knew who those guys were. So, you just stayed clear of them. And then there were some that were as good as gold. You just had to make up your own mind as to what was going on. You had to deal with what was going on within your ranks as well as what was going on in the streets. So, you had a busy day.
- 0:02:24 [DH] Do you feel you were treated fairly? You came in under Republican administration, then it changed to Democrat somewhere along the line.

Did you have any repercussions because you were a Republican police officer?

[JP] Oh, jokingly they'd tell me, "I need to get on board," you know. I guess... My grandmother had been active in Republican politics when I was in high school. So that couldn't help but help me in seeking a job in the Republican administration. And the Republican administration only got into office once every 20, 30 years, if that many.

[DH] Did you remember the Voorde, Mayor Voorde's administration?

[JP] He lived right there on my beat on Chapin Street. That's before it got to Washington Street.

[DH] Now he had an unofficial black cabinet. Speed Webb was part of the group, and do you remember any of that Voorde administration? He was very open for African Americans to be in his administration.

0:03:47 [JP] Yeah, he was... but I didn't know about the black cabinet thing. He... Speed was very active. I have so many clippings. Someday I'll dig them all out and give you a chance to go through them.

[DH] I would love to. Do you have any pictures of you and the beat during that time?

[JP] I don't know. I don't go through this stuff. I'll have to find it first.

[DH] Well, I'll give you a call. What we do, if you could you loan us the pictures for a few days, I get them scanned. You know what a scanner is?

[JP] Uh huh.

[DH] Well... Computer...

[JP] Yeah, sure.

0:04:44 [DH] We scan the pictures and put them on a disk. You have the originals back, and then we can... we're forming a library of pictures of what was happening here in South Bend, because the *South Bend Tribune* didn't do any reporting of what was happening in the black community and all this information is in closets and garages and all over.

[JP] You mentioned Marguerite?

[DH] Marguerite Taylor, yes.

[JP] Her grandmother was active. She did some writing for the *South Bend Tribune*.

[DH] "Colored Circles."

[JP] "Colored Circles." I'll never forget it.

[DH] Her name was Mrs. Boland, right?

[JP] Mrs. Boland.

[DH] And her daughter Renelda married...

[JP] The prize fighter. Nate Robinson.

[DH] "Dancin'" Nate Robinson. I interviewed "Dancin'" Nate.

[JP] He was a heck of a fighter.

[DH] He was! I got some clippings...

0:05:43 [JP] Yeah, he had skills. I guess was never able to hook up with the right manager.

[DH] Yeah. He said that Renelda didn't like him being gone for two and three days at a time...

[JP] That could be—

[DH] He'd go to Chicago or to New York, he's gone for usually three days. And he'd get there a day before the fight and leave the day after, so it was three days. But that was his name—"Dancin'" Nate Robinson.

[JP] Yeah.

[DH] So... let's see... so basically, we're almost done here. Basically, you worked as a police officer and you did your own thing. Black police officers had their own the beat, their own way of doing things. Does that mean that you took care of all the problems in the black community?

0:06:40 [JP] No. But I'll tell you... so many things happened, it was such a vast difference between the white police officers and the black police officers. I was one of the first to drive a squad car. And the chief asked me, did I have a driver's license? They couldn't conceive I guess of black police officers having anything came close to what they had. But you know, you just had to live it to believe went on. They've come a long way. South Bend Police. Yeah.

[DH] So they didn't think you had a driver's license?

[JP] Yeah, they just wanted to make sure I had it. Wasn't violating the law by driving that car. (Chuckles) Some of the things was pretty unbelievable. You'd have to laugh about it.

[DH] What about your locker areas at the South Bend Police Department? Did you have a separate area for the black police officers?

[JP] No, no, they were all in the same squad room. Things have come along.

[DH] If you got in a difficult situation, did you call on a white police officer to back you up? Did you have any problems with that?

0:08:19 [JP] No, we had call boxes. When I was walking the beat, there were call boxes that were distanced, probably 10-12 blocks away from where you got on your beat. And my job was to patrol in and out of all those places. And when I got to the call box, if I wanted to, I could call for a car to take me some place else. It was weird, some people wouldn't believe it.

[DH] A call box. I've never seen one.

[JP] Haven't you? It was a box that was put into the ground and it has a direct phone to the police radio room. They don't even have them anymore, but they were a great assistance because it gave you, if you could get to the box in time (laughs)...

[DH] (Laughs)

[JP] And they had them situated so when you walked your beat, when you took that phone off, it registered downtown. So they knew how many blocks you had walked, and asked what the activity was. A lot of people don't believe me. They're like you—said they've never seen a call box.

0:09:44 [DH] I've heard about them, but never seen one.

[JP] Somewhere around this city they have to have one stored somewhere. Those were the good ol' days.

[DH] Well it's been about an hour so I guess we can wrap this up.

[JP] It's been that long?

[DH] I can come back and talk to you some more! Um, is there any question I should have asked you that you feel I didn't ask?

[JP] No, no. I think you did a good job.

[DH] Well, thank you.

0:10:21 [JP] I'm going to have a lot of time on my hands. I just went to the Natatorium. The first Monday of the month they were allowed to swim, and then they had to let the water out and get the pool cleaned, don't forget. Then it stayed the first Monday of the month for a long time, and then they changed it to a week that black people could go.

But the Hering House was a gem. If it hadn't been for the Hering House, I think back, I don't know what would have happened. That became the focal point for black youth, and because of that place, stayed out of a lot of trouble. Your parents would let you go to the Herring House.

There was like a dance hall for black kids. It was called the Sugar Bowl. It was at the corner of Walnut and Western.

[DH] The Sugar Bowl.

[JP] Sugar Bowl.

[DH] Who ran it? Remember who?

0:11:41 [JP] No, I really don't. But I was too young by a couple years. They had an age limit—you had to be 16 to get in, and I'm talking when I was 14-15, I knew better than to even ask to go. And then they became more lenient, and starting allowing younger people to go in. They had a shooting. I was right outside the door, and that kind of closed things down.

[DH] This was at the Sugar Bowl.

[JP] Yeah. The Hering House just went on and on.

[DH] You must have known Mrs. Eskridge then?

[JP] Who?

[DH] Mrs. Eskridge? She was at the Herring House, wasn't she?

[JP] Peggy?

[DH] Yes. No, she was a teacher, that's right?

0:12:44 [JP] Yeah, she was a teacher. She used to go to the Hering House when I went, as kids.

[DH] Did you participate in any of the... like the Burleigh Theatre or anything like that?

[JP] No, I was familiar with it... I went to a lot of their... but that was mostly a singing group.

[DH] Right, it was musical. So, when you went to the Hering House, what did you do?

[JP] Ping pong, shot pool. Nate and the boxers worked out there.

[DH] The Brown Bombers, that's what they called themselves.

[JP] That's right.

[DH] They built an outside ring at one time. A boxing ring.

[JP] They did what?

[DH] They had an outside boxing ring.

[JP] Yes, that was outside the Hering House. Sure.

[DH] So you must have known B.G. Smith?

0:13:41 [JP] Oh, I worked with him. I was the rat boy and the pool room (laughs)

[DH] (Laughs)

[JP] Yeah, I knew B.G. Smith and his wife, Harriet?

[DH] I don't know.

[JP] He did a lot.

[DH] He was very active in the community—did many things.

[JP] Yep.

[DH] And Reverend White...

[JP] Reverend White.

[DH] Allens. And J. Fletcher...

[JP] J. Chester.

[DH: J. Chester and his wife Elizabeth.

0:14:13

[JP] It always amazed me, the YMCA—that was the Young Men's Christian Association, and yet we couldn't go to it. The YMCA was downtown where the library is now. It was an old building that tore down to build the library. I played for Central, and we didn't have our own gym. We used the Y's gym, and they'd let us practice there but that was it. When we were done with practice we had to leave. So, we went to the Hering House. And it just seemed so strange to me that they were the YMCA—what it stood for—and yet they excluded us.

[DH] I didn't know that.

[JP] Yep. My later... my sophomore, junior, and senior year we were allowed to use the facilities. I guess they figured we hadn't torn anything up in three years, so... but, uh, some things were so obvious—people had to know what was going on.

Well, I've enjoyed... you've done your homework.

[DH] Uh, I know a lot. I don't know as much as I need to know. Did you ever go to Playland Park?

0:15:56 [JP] All the time! Pete Reddin [spelling?] owned the park. He had a son that was my age and one that was younger. But yeah, my dad booked dances...

[DH] At Melody Gardens?

[JP] At Melody Gardens. He did that for years.

[DH] Now, I remember the dances were ... the ladies all dressed up. These were very elaborate dances. They wore corsages and had tables...

[JP] Yeah.

[DH] Beautiful. Did you know Charlie Howell, then?

[JP] Oh, sure.

[DH] He was a skater out there.

[JP] Huh?

[DH] He taught people how to skate.

[JP] Oh, I didn't know that.

[DH] At Playland. Now, Playland was segregated, too, wasn't it?

0:16:43 [JP] Yeah. There were certain nights. They'd have dances for black people. Uh, yeah, it was segregated. This town was segregated.

[DH] And that's difficult for people to understand today.

[JP] Yeah.

[DH] You couldn't go to the Philadelphia, you couldn't go to Kresge's... or, uh... Did your mother have any experiences... You said she was at Milady Shop. Now I was told that Milady Shop was sort of segregated.

[JP] No, not to my knowledge. I used to go in there after school to see my mother for something, and I have seen black people in there. But the prices were so far... that would have kept most of them out.

[DH] Okay. You mentioned Clark's restaurant.

[JP] Dan Clark. And he eventually changed his policy. And once he saw there were no problems, he just continued to let it go. But there's so many places downtown.

[DH] I was told... you remember Alan Pinado?

[JP] Alan Pinado? I don't believe so.

0:18:16 [DH] In his interview he stated that Bonnie Doon's was the only place that was never segregated. You could go there anytime. Did you ever go to Bonnie Doon's?

[JP] All the time.

[DH] That's quite credit to Bonnie Doon's for never discriminating.

[JP] They had the drive-in. They had the inside, too, but they had the drive-in, too.

[DH] Did you buy your clothes at Gilbert's downtown or Adler's?

[JP] Spiral's.

[DH] Spiral's? Spiral's was a men's store?

[JP] Yeah.

[DH] I'd never heard of that one before. Where was it located at?

[JP] On Michigan Street, on the west side of the street, between Jefferson and Washington.

[DH] Okay. Well, I have taken up more of your time than I probably should've... I really appreciate...

[Audio Ends]